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Vanity, Texas-style

In two nationally-televised conversations with Walter Cronkite of CBS, former President Lyndon B. Johnson has already given a thickly-varnished account of the controversies that destroyed his administration—notably over Vietnam. He argued, for instance, that his decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam was not a response to fresh influences in the administration, but the result of a policy calmly worked out at the suggestion of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, then identified in the public mind as a stolid hawk, and having little or nothing to do with the Tet disaster, Clark Clifford or any other such factor.

The historians are yet to speak with disinterest and perspective on such issues; when they finally do, they may not agree.

But like the televised apologias, the former President's forthcoming memoirs tell us a good bit about the character of Lyndon Johnson. They confirm an inability to see or admit an error of judgment that approaches a sense of infallibility.

When errors were made, and he acknowledges few of consequence, they were not, he tells us, made by himself. It was President Kennedy's connivance in the overthrow of Diem, not his own decision to send ground troops in 1965, two years later, that plunged the nation so deeply in the Indochina bog. It was not his own record of rebuffing peace overtures, but the campaign tactics of Hubert Humphrey or Richard Nixon, that postponed agreement to negotiate in 1968. It was not the Tet offensive itself, but the press's disloyal interpretation of it (which incidentally was shared, to LBJ's anger, by the Central Intelligence Agency) that stimulated a great change in "public will" to prosecute the war. And so on and on.

Even where President Johnson claims an undisputed foreign-policy success, as in the Dominican Republic, he is careful to say that whatever may have been questionable about direct American intervention had been put on the drawing boards by President Kennedy.

Although President Johnson managed to create an unparalleled public impression of duplicity, duplicity seems not quite the right word for his retrospective manipulation of the record. Rather, what we have here is a thirst for vindication so monstrous that no account is taken of the failure of the American people to share his exalted estimate of his own judgment.

That is merely a minor tragedy for him, so far as the memoirs are concerned. For the nation itself, it was a major tragedy, sorely dividing and demoralizing the country, and amounting to a folly from which the nation may be generations recovering.

Lyndon Johnson's problem was, as many had reason to suspect at the time, a colossal vanity, the kind of vanity that discounts criticism or assigns to it base motives, the kind of vanity that finds reason for failure only in the actions of others and never in itself. Such vanity may be acceptable in an absolute monarch who believes that he rules by divine appointment. In a President ruling only by and with the consent of the ruled, it is a disastrous flaw and it is little wonder that the Johnson presidency collapsed in a total shambles.

"I have not written these chapters to say, 'This is how it was,' but to say, 'This is how I saw it from my vantage point,'" says Mr. Johnson in his preface. Amen to that, and may the republic be delivered from further experience of Texas-sized egos.